

ALASKA FAR AWAY

DOCUMENTING AN AMERICAN ADVENTURE STORY



JUSTER HILL PRODUCTIONS

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This exhibit sponsored by **Matanuska Valley Federal Credit Union**

Alaska Far Away

As the Great Depression of the 1930s plunged the entire country into despair, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” sought ways to help the millions devastated by the economic crisis and drought. To this end, in 1935 the government embarked on one of its boldest social experiments: resettling 202 struggling rural families from the upper Midwest to the fertile Matanuska Valley in Alaska to establish a farming colony.

This historic project not only provided a helping hand to the families involved, but also provided hope and inspiration to millions of others. The ‘New Deal Pioneers’ – volunteers from northern Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin – captured the imagination of the American public. The entire country followed the journey of these modern-day pilgrims and their progress in this new ‘Promised Land’, the Territory of Alaska. However, as celebrated – and controversial – as it was at the time, in the ensuing years the story has faded from public view.

To bring the story to light for a new generation, in 1994 Juster Hill Productions began filming *ALASKA FAR AWAY*. This documentary film traces the roots of the Matanuska Colony from the hardships faced by farmers in the Midwest’s “Cutover” region, to how the government gave them a chance to start over in a new land – Alaska. The story is largely told through interviews with the original colonists and their families, and others who helped build the colony.

Documenting the story of the Matanuska Colony has been an adventure in itself. The search for archival film, photographs, letters, diaries, and official documents has taken the San Francisco-based filmmakers around the country. Many of the materials included in the film have never before been made available to the public.

But it is the interviews with colonists, their families, and others who were part of the colony, that are the heart of *ALASKA FAR AWAY*. It has been a privilege to document the stories of people who worked so hard and risked so much to follow their dream of a better life. We wish to express our profound gratitude to all those who shared their stories with us, and to everyone who has helped us document the history of this community.

The panels that follow provide an overview of the Matanuska Colony in images and words. Each section includes excerpts from interviews filmed for *ALASKA FAR AWAY*, as well as notes from the filmmakers.



Filmmakers Joan Juster and Paul Hill



Colonist Julia Church shares photos with historian Jim Fox



Filming an interview with colonist Viola Lentz



Colonist Mary Monroe in an interview with her children Gene and Shirley

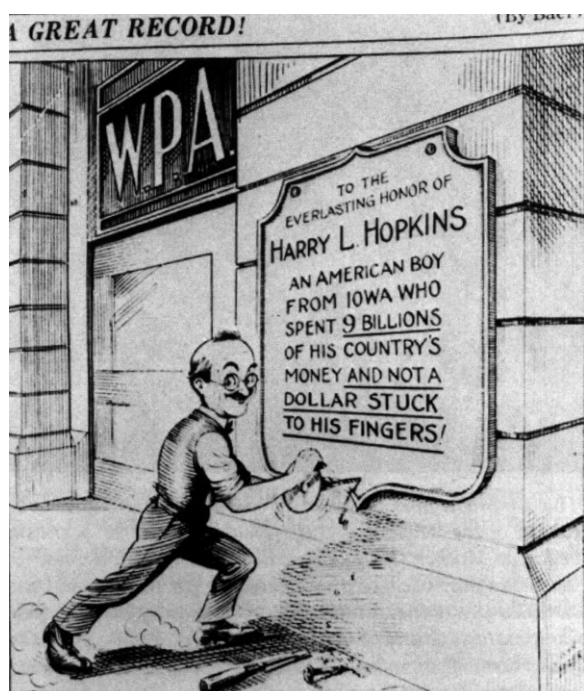
The Depression and the New Deal



President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought new hope to a country beaten down by hard times

The widespread suffering caused by the Great Depression required creative and immediate solutions. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933, he promised a "New Deal" for the American people. Relief programs were created with lightning speed. Among the most ambitious of his new relief agencies was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration – the FERA. The man FDR entrusted with running this massive collection of relief efforts was a no-

nonsense former social worker, Harry L. Hopkins.



Hopkins earned a reputation as a big spender, but a fair dealer. He was responsible for providing emergency relief to millions of Americans.



The Matanuska Colony was one of over 100 New Deal resettlement communities across the country. The programs relocated people from submarginal farmland, or from isolated areas, to new communities that offered better land and more opportunities. The idea was that the relocated families could raise their own food on a few acres of land, and supplement their farm income with employment in the local community.

The Matanuska Colony, which began under the auspices of the FERA, was unique among these projects due to its size and scale, because the participants were relocated so far from home, and because Alaska was seen at the time as an empty, frozen wilderness.

Historians often argue that the New Deal resettlement projects were failures because they were expensive, and did not necessarily meet their goals. However, the colonists and their descendants have a very different view. The communities, Matanuska included, may have failed to achieve all that the organizers had planned, but they did not fail the people who took part. They offered economic and educational opportunities that might otherwise have been beyond their reach.

Visionary architect David Williams designed several of the New Deal resettlement communities, including the Matanuska Colony.



JHP notes: Interviewing people about the Depression was more difficult than anticipated. It was hard for these proud, hard-working people to revisit a time when they had to ask for help to feed their families.



"When you can't find work, and the kids need something to eat, what're you gonna do?"
— LEROY HAMANN, colonist

"Everybody was hard up. Sometimes we couldn't even find two cents for a letter, to mail a letter."

— MARGARET NELSON, colonist



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Meanwhile, in Alaska



Pre-colony settlers John Bugge and Ed Ueek at Bugge's cabin, located in what would become the heart of downtown Palmer

HUGE FEDERAL PROJECT CONTEMPLATED FOR BIG AREA NEAR ANCHORAGE

ASSISTANT EMERGENCY RELIEF ADMINISTRATOR BAKER TOURS MATANUSKA VALLEY AND MAKES CAREFUL INSPECTION WITH POSSIBILITY RECOMMENDING COLONIZATION OF BIG AREA WITH FARMERS FROM DROUGHT-STRICKEN STATES — TELLS OF PROJECT

Seriously considering the practicability and possibility of federal government colonization of Alaska's famous Matanuska farming area with families from the drought-stricken central northern states, Jacob Baker, assistant director of the Federal Administration Relief, now on tour of Alaska from Washington, D. C., spent

of farmers and their families in the Matanuska area. Outlines Project When interviewed in Anchorage last evening, Mr. Baker stated that the colonization scheme for the Matanuska valley is thus far but an idea of his own, and one which may come to fruition. He was greatly im-

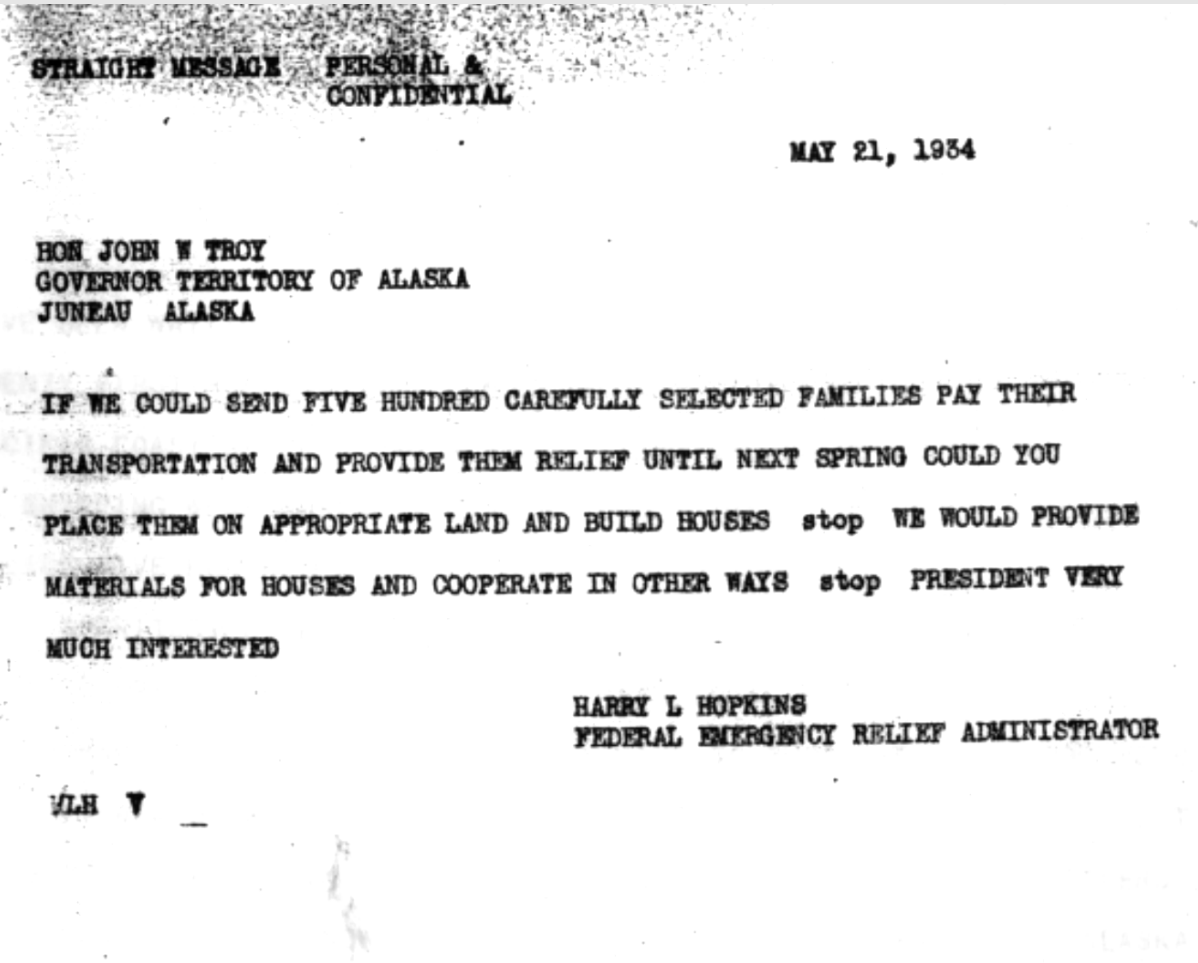


The Dena'ina lived in the Matanuska Valley for thousands of years before the first white settlers arrived in the 18th century.

The United States purchased the vast Territory of Alaska from Russia in 1867, and for many years didn't know what to do with it. In an era before global communications, it seemed too remote, until the Gold Rush turned the eyes of the world northward. A frontier mentality prevailed, and though many came to try to make their fortunes, few stayed to settle and develop the area.

Colonel Otto F. Ohlson, manager of the Alaska Railroad, led efforts to attract permanent settlers. In 1929 he sent M.D. Snodgrass, director of the valley's agricultural experiment station, on a lecture tour through the Midwest to recruit farmers. While some came, it became clear that any large-scale settlement would need to be supported by government assistance.

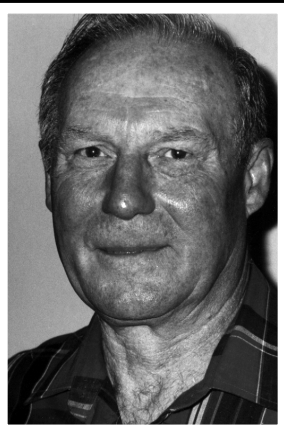
Meanwhile, with the threat of war on the horizon, Washington began to realize the strategic importance of Alaska. Colonization was a way to boost the territory's civilian population to support military defense programs.



Telegram

The telegram from FERA director Harry L. Hopkins to Governor Troy of the Territory of Alaska, shows Washington's interest in colonizing Alaska as early as mid-1934.

JHP notes: We looked far and wide for original documents that would provide clues to the colony's genesis. Hopkins' telegram to Governor Troy was one such discovery.



Alan Linn, son of settlers who joined the colony as replacements

"So a man named M.D. Snodgrass came through on a recruiting trip for staff up here and my dad said I think maybe I'll make that trip, if I can go up there for a couple of years, a two-year contract I can tell my grandchildren someday, "I was in Alaska once." — ALAN LINN

"For years they'd been trying to colonize the valley anyway, and a few came up every year, but they would never stay.... I think they were kind of excited to see things come in here, too...I think everybody did. Anxious to see something happen." — FRANK CORNELIUS



June Liebing, daughter of settlers

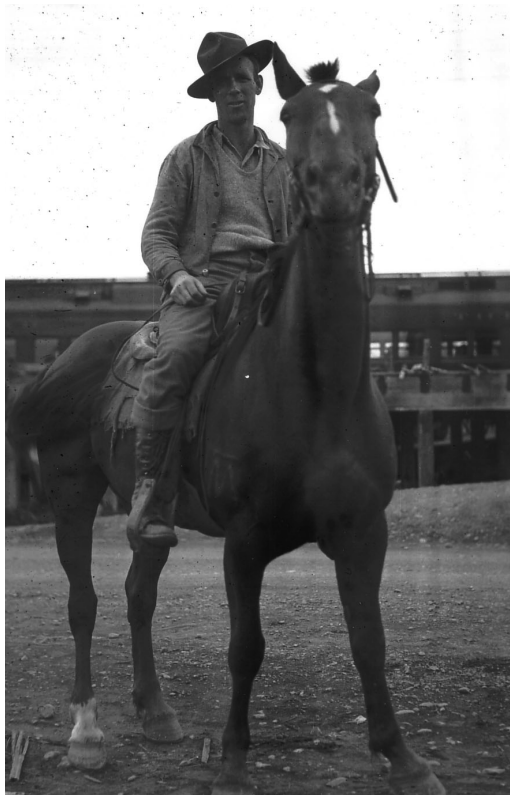
"Visitors almost always assume that anybody that's been here for a long time would be a colony family. It is kind of nice to be able to say, "Oh, no, we were standing here waiting for them!" — JUNE LIEBING

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Planning the Future



"I thought it was wonderful. I thought it was a marvelous thing to do for the people involved. And I thought it would be a great thing for Alaska to establish agricultural activity up there that was worthwhile. I was sold on the project 100%." – Stewart Campbell, FERA administrator

Planning began at the FERA offices in Washington, D.C. in January 1935, only four short months before the colonists were to arrive in Alaska. The planners knew that they would have to take full advantage of Alaska's short summer season if the colonists were to be housed before winter.

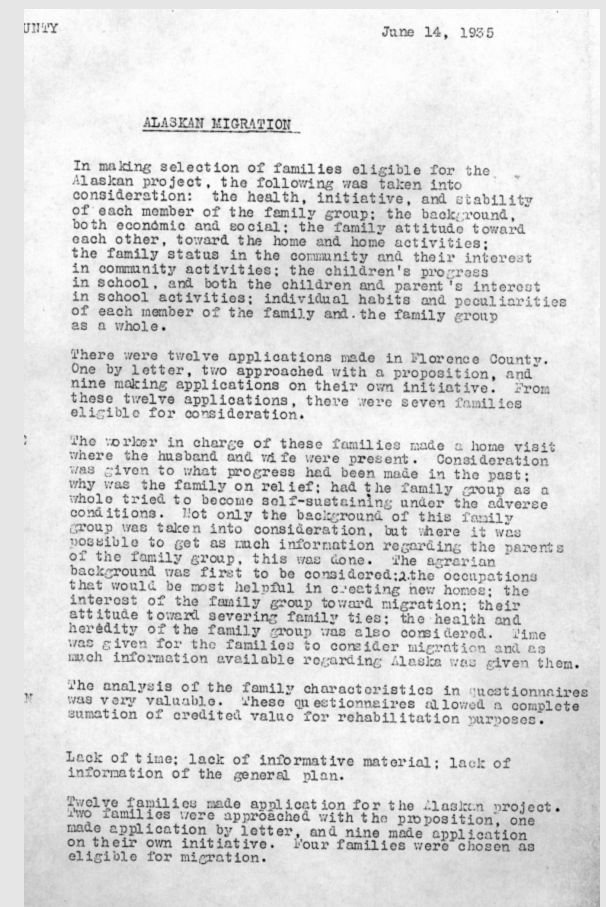
Thousands of letters deluged the FERA offices from families wanting to join the project. However, it was

decided that the colonists would be selected from the northernmost counties of the upper Midwest. Once rich in timber, mining, and jobs, the area's abundant resources had been overexploited. With the trees and ore gone, all that remained were tree stumps, and one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. The vast stretches of barren land earned the area the name "the Cutover".



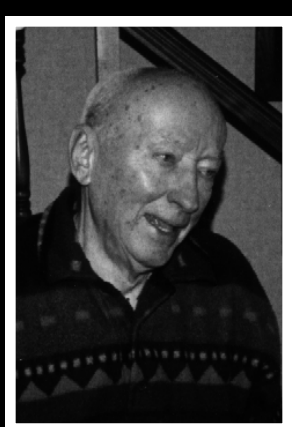
The colonists were selected from 67 counties throughout northern Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota — an area called "the Cutover"

While plans for building the colony took shape in Washington, the task of selecting the colonists from local relief rolls was delegated to social workers in selected counties throughout the Cutover. Criteria were established.

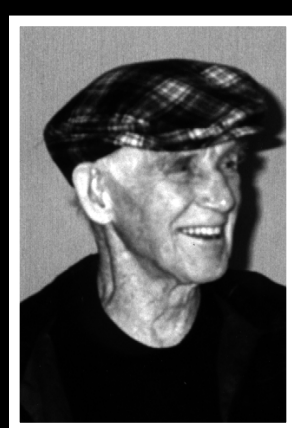


They were told to look for married couples, not too young or too old, in good health, and preferably with children. They wanted people who had some farming background, although other trades would be helpful as well. Beyond the specific criteria, however, they were to look for an indefinable quality that would deem the candidates suitable for the rigors of pioneering in the far north.

JHP notes: Two men provided a rare look at what the Depression was like from the standpoint of those providing relief. Stewart Campbell not only sat in on planning sessions in Washington, D.C., but he also worked onsite in Palmer to help coordinate the logistical challenges during the early days of the colony. In 1935 Donald Sundberg was one of the social workers responsible for selecting and preparing colonists for Matanuska.



"People, the average person, I'm sure, would much rather work for a living than go down and have somebody hand 'em ten dollars or a piece of scrip or something like that to go to a store. You know, you feel worthless. If you're working for something, you feel you've accomplished something, and you're participating in society as a whole and making it a better place to live."
— DONALD SUNDBERG



"I think the conceiving and implementation of a project of this nature — sending two hundred destitute families to a foreign land, so to speak, a wilderness, to establish an agricultural economy — even though it might be small, in a land where that was not the case — is one of the great achievements of our country. And I think it turned out regardless of the criticisms, and regardless of the people who left. It has turned out to be a great success and was a big contributor to the success of Alaska's statehood. And I am very proud to have been a part of that."
— STEWART CAMPBELL

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Leaving It All Behind



Saying goodbye

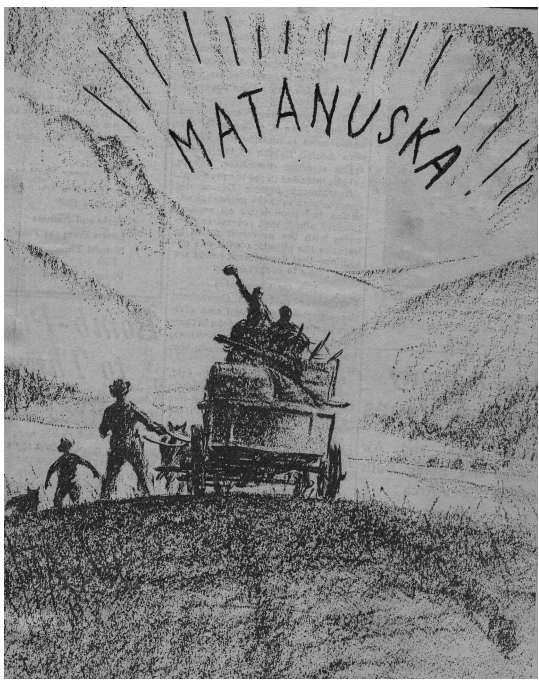


Vickaryous family leaving Minnesota

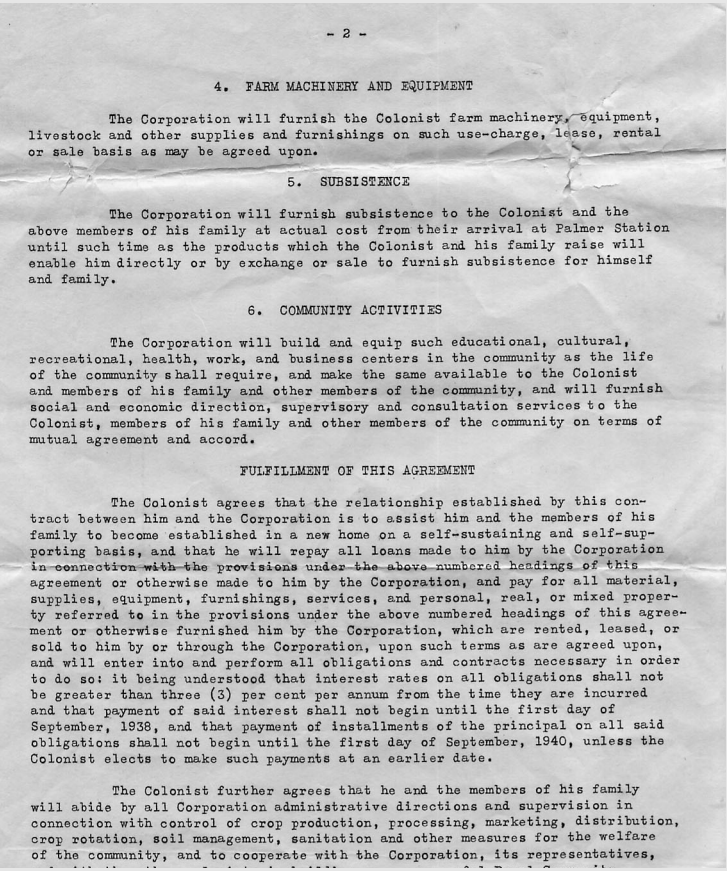
The prospective colonists had little time to prepare for their new lives. Some had only a few weeks, or even a few days, to pack, sell their houses and extra belongings, and say goodbye to family and friends. Many of the colonists had never been far from home and family before, and Alaska was very far away – they had no assurance that they would ever see their loved ones again.

While some colonists received thorough briefings from their social workers as to what to expect in Alaska, others were left to their own devices to learn what conditions would be like.

Cartoon from the Milwaukee Journal



Each family was required to sign a contract which spelled out the details of what the government could provide, and what was expected of the families.



Each family was to be allotted forty acres, household and farming supplies, and a house, all to be paid back to the government

through a 30-year, low-interest loan. In return, they agreed to “abide by all Corporation administrative directions and supervision...” regarding their participation in the colony. As the colony developed, interpretation of this loosely worded contract became subject to debate.



“We had to give most of our stuff away when we really started to get up here because we had a home and all kinds of things, too, and you couldn’t sell a dumb thing, not one thing. Everybody would come and we had to give it away, couldn’t sell it, nobody had money, everybody was in the same fix you might say, and I gave a lot of it to my neighbors. And we had \$30 when we came to Palmer. That’s all the money we had.”
— HILDA HERMON, colonist



“At that time, Alaska was just a remote part of the world. We hardly knew what it was or what it was like. So...we had to do a lot of studying and reading. And of course we read everything we could find then. But we still didn’t know much.”
— LILLIAN ECKERT, colonist



“I didn’t know anything about it! It was a different country as far as I was concerned. But when they suggested going to Alaska, why, I thought it was wonderful! I wanted to come.”
— LILLIAN JOHNSTON, colonist

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North to Alaska



The Swanda family arriving in Alaska

The first leg of the journey was by train from the Midwest to the West Coast. Two days and nights sitting up in coach seats may have been uncomfortable, but it was a minor inconvenience compared to the luxury of being served in a dining car.

San Francisco and Seattle outdid each other in rolling out the red carpet. It was a welcome respite before heading out to sea.

They sailed on board the *St. Mihiel*, an Army transport ship. Heavily laden with freight as well as passengers, the ship was too heavy to take the calm Inside Passage route, and instead sailed straight across the open seas, causing widespread seasickness. When they finally landed at Seward, the weary travelers were relieved to catch their first glimpse of Alaska.

The journey to Alaska inspired some colonists to write songs, including this one, sung to the tune of the old standard, "When It's Springtime in the Rockies":

WHEN IT'S SPRINGTIME IN ALASKA
AND IT'S NINETY-NINE BELOW,
WHERE THE ESKIMOS GO BAREFOOT
THROUGH THE WHITE AND DRIFTED SNOW.
WHEN POLAR BEARS GET SUNBURNED
AT MIDNIGHT OR BY DAY,
WHEN IT'S SPRINGTIME IN ALASKA -
IN ALASKA FAR AWAY.

WHERE THE BERRIES GROW LIKE PUMPKINS
AND A CABBAGE FILLS A TRUCK
WHERE MILK AND CREAM ARE FLOWING,
FOR A MARKET WE'RE NOT STUCK,
WHERE THE SUN IS ALWAYS SHINING
AND THE SEALS SING ALL THE DAY,
WHEN IT'S SPRINGTIME IN ALASKA -
IN ALASKA FAR AWAY.

SOME PEOPLE THINK WE'RE FOOLISH
AND ARE SURE WE WILL REGRET;
I'M AFRAID THEY ARE MISTAKEN,
FOR I SEE NO SIGN AS YET.
WE WANT TO MAKE A NEW START
SOMEWHERE WITHOUT DELAY,
SO, HERE WE ARE ALASKA,
AND WE HAVE COME TO STAY!



The U.S. Army Transport *St. Mihiel* brought the colonists to their new home

Telling the story of the colonists' journey from the Midwest to Alaska is complicated by the fact that they came via two different routes, at two different times.

The first train, with 67 families from Minnesota, left from St. Paul on April 26, 1935, bound for San Francisco. On May 1st they boarded the U.S. Army Transport ***St. Mihiel***, arriving in Palmer on May 10th.

Two weeks later, on May 13th, a second train, bearing 135 families from Michigan and Wisconsin, departed for Seattle. On May 18th they sailed for Alaska on the ***St. Mihiel***. When they docked in Seward on May 22nd, the men were sent ahead to Palmer to take part in the drawing for tracts of land for their farms. The women and children remained on the ship until May



24th, when they continued on to Palmer.

Six of the Michigan and Wisconsin families had stayed behind in Seattle due to illness; they arrived in Alaska on May 27th via the ***North Star***.

JHP notes: As we listened to each colonist's stories of the trip from the Midwest to Alaska, we were struck by the vividness of the details. The journey clearly made a very deep impression upon them, and the memories of this adventure loomed large in each family's history. In this age of global travel and instant communication, this was a reminder that when these people came north in 1935, Alaska was, indeed, very far away.



Merle "Chris" Anderson, son of colonists

"Yeah, I remember that boat trip. I'll never forget it. I figured I was going to be an Alaskan for life, because at that time the only way to go was by boat, and I'll be damned if I was going to go out that way again. One way was enough!"

—MERLE "CHRIS" ANDERSON

How did people treat you on this trip? "Oh, shall I tell you? Like a bunch of monkeys! We were an oddity. "Oh, I saw a colonist today, and they looked just like anybody else!" Maybe they thought we looked like a bear, a polar bear or something."

—MERYLE PETERSON

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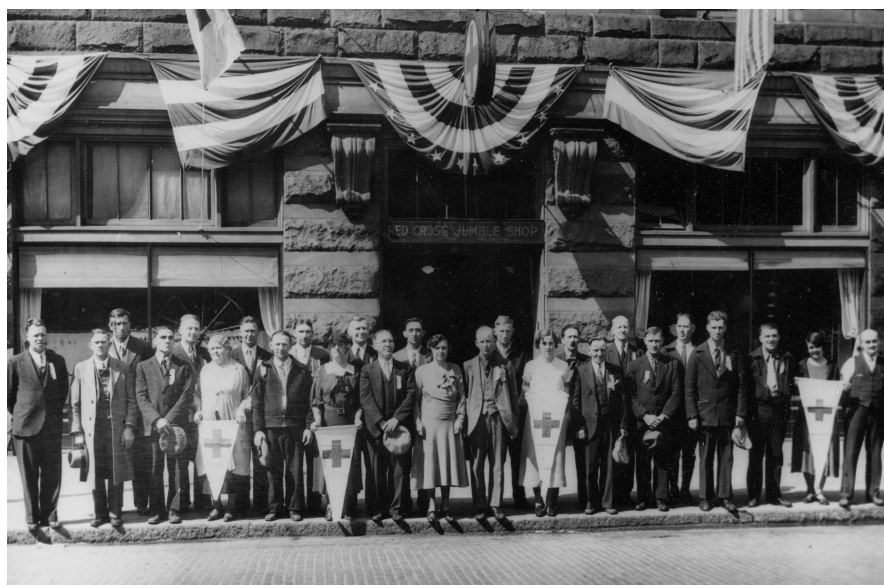
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Hoopla and Headlines



Minnesota colonists get their first look at the Pacific Ocean
"I thought it was really beautiful. See, I'd never even seen an ocean before. It just looked awful big to me." — HELEN PALMER



Not to be outdone in civic hospitality, Seattle rolled out the red carpet for the colonists.

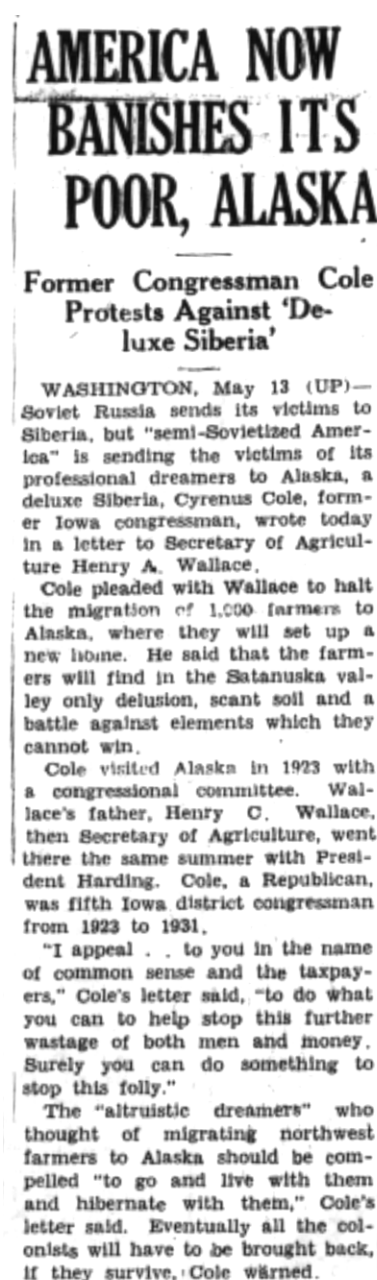


"I don't remember much fanfare till we finally got to San Francisco. And they were pretty glad to meet us. Every place we stopped otherwise, they'd have a band out or something, or some officials. They treated us very well in San Francisco."

— LILLIAN ECKERT, colonist

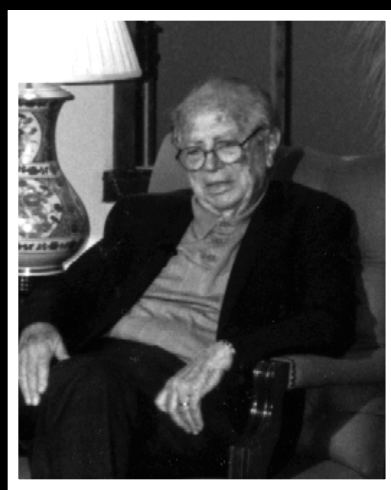
As the colonists speeded across country by train, public interest in their saga grew. Both San Francisco and Seattle greeted the weary travelers with royal welcomes: keys to the city, free streetcar rides, theaters, entertainment, gifts, and, of course, brass bands. Reporters and newsreel cameras were everywhere.

The colony was covered thoroughly — and dramatically — by the press. From the time the colonists left their homes in the Midwest, the press alternately glorified them as noble and heroic, and vilified them as being unworthy of the designation "pioneer". Living under the microscope of the press, it began to sink in that they were involved in something bigger than they had realized. By the time the colonists boarded the St. Mihiel, they knew that, for better or worse, they had become national celebrities.



Arville Schaleben was a cub reporter when the Milwaukee Journal assigned him to cover the Matanuska Colony. He traveled to Alaska with the colonists, and lived with them in the tent city throughout the first summer. He not only filed over 150 stories, but also took over 400 photographs. He continued to follow up on the story every few years until his death in 1999. His body of work forms a thorough and compelling picture of the early days of the colony, seen through the eyes of an astute observer.

JHP notes: We interviewed three journalists who reported on the colony: Kris Gilbertson of the Daily News in Rhinelander, Wisconsin, who covered their departure from the Midwest; Robert Atwood of the Anchorage Daily Times, who followed the colony as it developed over the years; and Arville Schaleben of the Milwaukee Journal, who traveled to Alaska with the colonists and lived with them during the first four months.

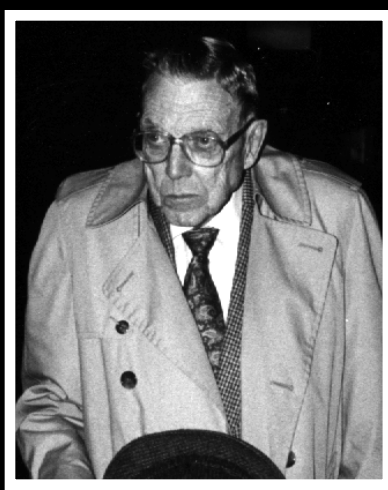


Arville Schaleben,
Milwaukee Journal

"I was pretty sure that the colony was going to be a success, although I don't think that I ever said that in

print. But at any rate I certainly realized that I was in a hell of a good spot to be as a journalist.

— ARVILLE SCHALEBEN



Kris Gilbertson,
Rhinelander Daily News

if you wanted to start a business or start in a profession, but first you had to get there.

— KRIS GILBERTSON

"Alaska was a faraway land then. The only way to get there was by boat. It was called a great place



Robert Atwood,
Anchorage Daily Times

some money and send these people here to do something constructive in Alaska. It was just a terrific event for us."

— ROBERT ATWOOD

"It was a big step ahead for Alaska. The colony was a big breakthrough in getting the federal government to break out with

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Getting Ready

*Transient workers
boarding the North
Star en route to Alaska*



*Planners en
board the
North Star*

Less than three weeks before the first colonists were to arrive in Alaska, the government imported construction workers from labor camps along the West Coast. These “transients”, as they were known, shipped out on the *North Star* on April 23rd, 1935. They were the vanguard, sent to prepare temporary housing for the over 1500 men, women and children who were on their way.

The logistics were enormous. To receive over 200 families plus support staff into an undeveloped area, land had to be surveyed, roads built, and a city of tents erected. The *North Star* was loaded with farm and road building machinery, tractors, trucks, and buses.

After months of preparation, the plans were now put to the test. With no local source for building supplies or food, every nail, every hammer, every sack of flour had to be shipped in from Seattle. Inevitably, there were some problems with supplies.

The New Deal planners in Washington knew that Alaskan input was key to the project's success. They created the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation as the on-site administration for the project. Don Irwin, an experienced Alaskan agricultural planner, was appointed resident general manager of the project. While Irwin was in Washington, Ross Sheely, director of the extension services of the University of Alaska, was in charge of preparing the colony in the valley.

This was an high-profile, controversial, and expensive project. Those in charge knew that every move they made would be scrutinized, criticized and politicized.



Don Irwin, left, first resident general manager of the Matanuska Colony

JHP notes: Building the colony required a large support crew: supervisors, architects, construction crews, administrators, clerical staff, cooks, and medical staff. They provide yet another view of the colony.



“We were contending with a lot of things, at the headquarters. You know, trying to get the buildings up, and working in this mud and rain, and... It must have been disconcerting for the head people that were trying to run it.”

— VIRGINIA BERG LAGERGREN, ARRC secretary



“All the young people were coming up to the Matanuska to work. They needed secretaries, and they needed waitresses, and they needed everybody up here, and...there was no place to rent, so if you wanted a place to live, you had to work, and then the government would issue a GI tent.”

— HENRIETTA WEEDA, business owner

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The Colony Begins



"We looked out over that sea of tents, and we knew we had shelter..." — Bob Pippel, son of colonists



"We did pack two barrels of stuff, and boy, am I glad we did. Because when we hit Palmer, it was...nothing."
— Minnie Swanda, colonist

When the first colonists finally arrived at their destination on May 10th, they discovered that Palmer was just a tiny outpost along the railroad, with little visible from the station but trees, mud, and a sea of tents. They were greeted by the administrators and crews who had been preparing for them, and by local settlers who were curious to meet their new neighbors. Overnight, Palmer was transformed from a quiet little community to a boom town.

Pioneers in Alaska; Off for New Homes

Times Daily, May 23, 1935
Men Draw Lots for Land; to Pitch Camp While Women Wait in Seward
BY ARVILLE SCHALESEN
OF THE TIMES STAFF
Seward, Alaska—The men of the Wisconsin and Michigan pioneers of 1935 turned their faces Thursday toward the interior of Alaska, where they are to set up new homes in the wilderness.
The flag waving, the cheering, the feasting and rounds of entertainment that have been daily routine for the pioneers since they left their homes in the middle west is about over. Reality is at hand. Ahead there is mostly hard work and they know it.
The women and children of the party were left behind at Seward and will stay there until the men have set up camp at Palmer and have some kind of accommodations ready for them.
They Part Tearfully
Many of the women were so tearful at parting from their menfolk that one would think the separation was going to be permanent or at least for months, but remember that these women are in a strange country, more than 4,000 miles from home and can hardly be blamed for being upset.
The women and children will sleep and eat aboard the St. Michael until they leave for camp. The men were to draw lots Thursday for their 40-acre lots in the Matanuska valley.
All the colonists were at the rail Wednesday when the St. Michael steamed up to Seward's timbered dock. As the boat moved in the 12-piece band on the pier blared forth martial music and 200 or so smiling Alaskans were on hand to welcome their new compatriots. Cheers were few, but the crowd on the dock left no doubt of Seward's curiosity about and about the new frontier at whose doorstep they then stood.
Words you heard most frequently were: "This looks great to me. It looks like rough country right through here, but I reckon we can cut her down."
The ship's crew had its hands full unloading passengers. Everybody wanted to get off at once and came stampeding out like pirates about to sack the city.
"Take it easy now," officers at the gangplank cautioned. "Don't forget your dogs. Got all your children?"
The advice was appreciated but these people demanded action. They got it.
"Come on, ma, hurry up. Grab Betty and get going." "Where's West? Where's West?" "Oh, gosh, (CONTINUED ON PAGE 2, COLUMN 1)

Pioneers Reach Alaskan Goal

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

we forgot our canary. Who's got our canary?" "Mister, did you see our canary?"
It seemed that nobody had seen that canary, lugged all the way from the upper peninsula, but it turned up later looking forlorn and forgotten on the plank runway between the pier and land.
Will Bowers of Rhineland, mighty man of a large family, almost came to blows with one gangplank custodian. As usual, he couldn't find one of his 11 youngsters.
He Was Going Back
"Let me through here," he commanded, shouldering a husky sailor. "I'm going back on this boat."
"Never mind where you're going," the harried sailor barked gruffly. "I'm getting these kids off without any broken legs, ain't I? I can take care of them better than you can."
"No you can't," Bill pugnaciously retorted. "I've taken care of them 20 years and I'm not quitting now." But finally he calmed down and

"One of the early settlers was John Bugge. He was always a big booster for the area. You should have more settlers. So he was very excited. Well, when the first trainload came, he was in his log cabin, looking east toward

the railroad tracks, and Ed Ueek, another homesteader, was in the cabin with him. And John saw the train, and saw all these people begin to come off the train. And he said, looking out the window, "this valley will never be the same again." There was a tear coming down his cheek. And Ed said, you have to understand, that's what all these men had worked for all their lives. But they also knew that everything that they had loved and enjoyed would change forever." — Jim Fox, grandson of colonists

Hail and Good Cheer to the New Alaskans -- Welcome Home Anchorage Daily Times

MEMBER ASSOCIATED PRESS

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PRICE TEN CENTS

ANCHORAGE GIVES COLONISTS BIG WELCOME

JHP notes: While it may have seemed like the colonists were coming to a vast wilderness, there was a small but lively community waiting for them when they arrived. We were fortunate to be able to talk to several people who were here when the colonists arrived.

"We went to see what colonists were. Hey, it's "colonists, colonists are coming." So we went, dashed down there and sat on the platform. The train started unloading, and it's, "Hey, these are people. People! Kids, dogs, cats....gosh! And we ran 'n hid."

— PEARL SMITH, daughter of settlers



Minnie Swanda, colonist

"The next morning, you know...No stoves, nothing was set up in the tents. They were just barely the platform. In some places, they had the tent; but wasn't even fastened down. And it was rainy, and mud up to your ying-yang, you know. ...It was cold, it was muddy, it was rainy, and I thought my God, what did we get into?"

— MINNIE SWANDA



Jimmy, Sarah, Shirley, and Pearl Smith, children of settlers

ALASKA FAR AWAY

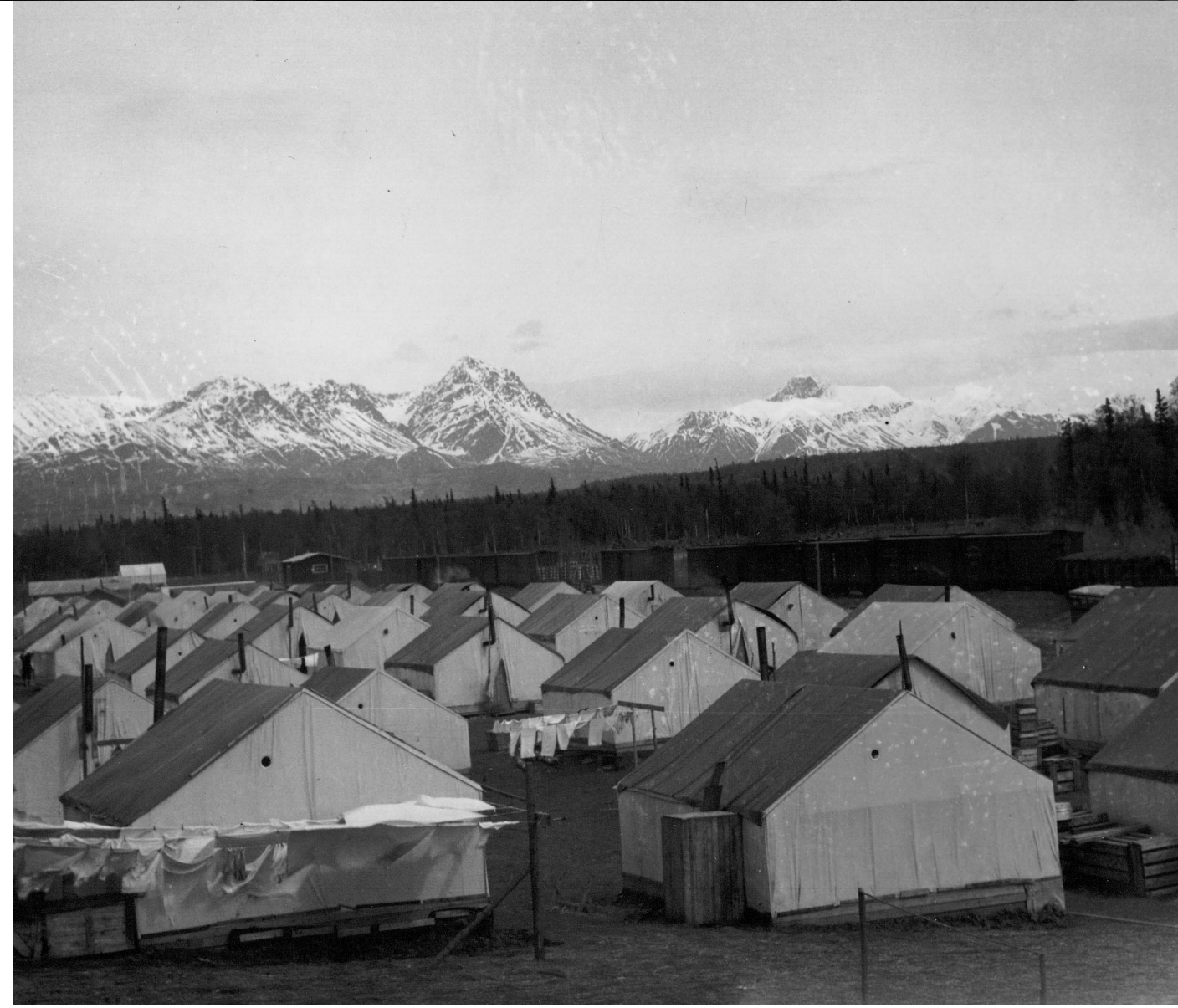
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The First Summer — Life in the Tents



Nick Weiler with a moose



The colonists lived in 16'x20' tents for several months while their homes were being built. Made of rough board floors and white canvas, the tents challenged the good humor and housekeeping skills of even the best homemakers.

But the families settled in and made themselves at home while their houses were being built. The bounty of the valley provided hunting, fishing, and berry picking to supplement their food stores and prepare for the winter. The University of Alaska sent a home extension agent to teach the women pioneering and homemaking skills that would help them survive the rugged life.



The colonist display salmon that they have canned



Mrs. Yohn tends her garden

To earn cash and avoid running up debt at the colony's commissary, many raised vegetables in the community garden, while others started small businesses: taking in laundry, cutting hair, baking, or making souvenir trinkets for the tourists.



"I had a boiler and I boiled the white clothes in the boiler, and run them on the washboard. By the way, I still have my washboard. Yeah, we didn't have any washing machines then. See, there was a spring down over the bank that the house was built on, and we carried water from the spring in pails." — ELLA HENRY



"Well, it was rugged. We didn't have electricity. We had gas and kerosene lamps and we had to haul the water. Now it was more like homesteading to me and we had...I chopped wood and helped split it...we had some chickens and I had about 10 chickens and he helped me butcher those. Well, it was kind of rough." — THEO CAMPBELL

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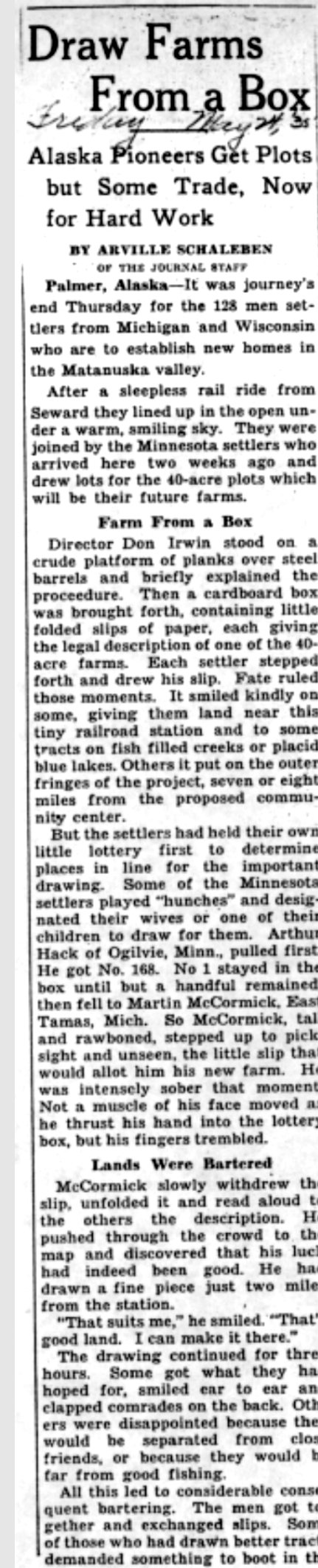
Down To Work



Studying plans for houses



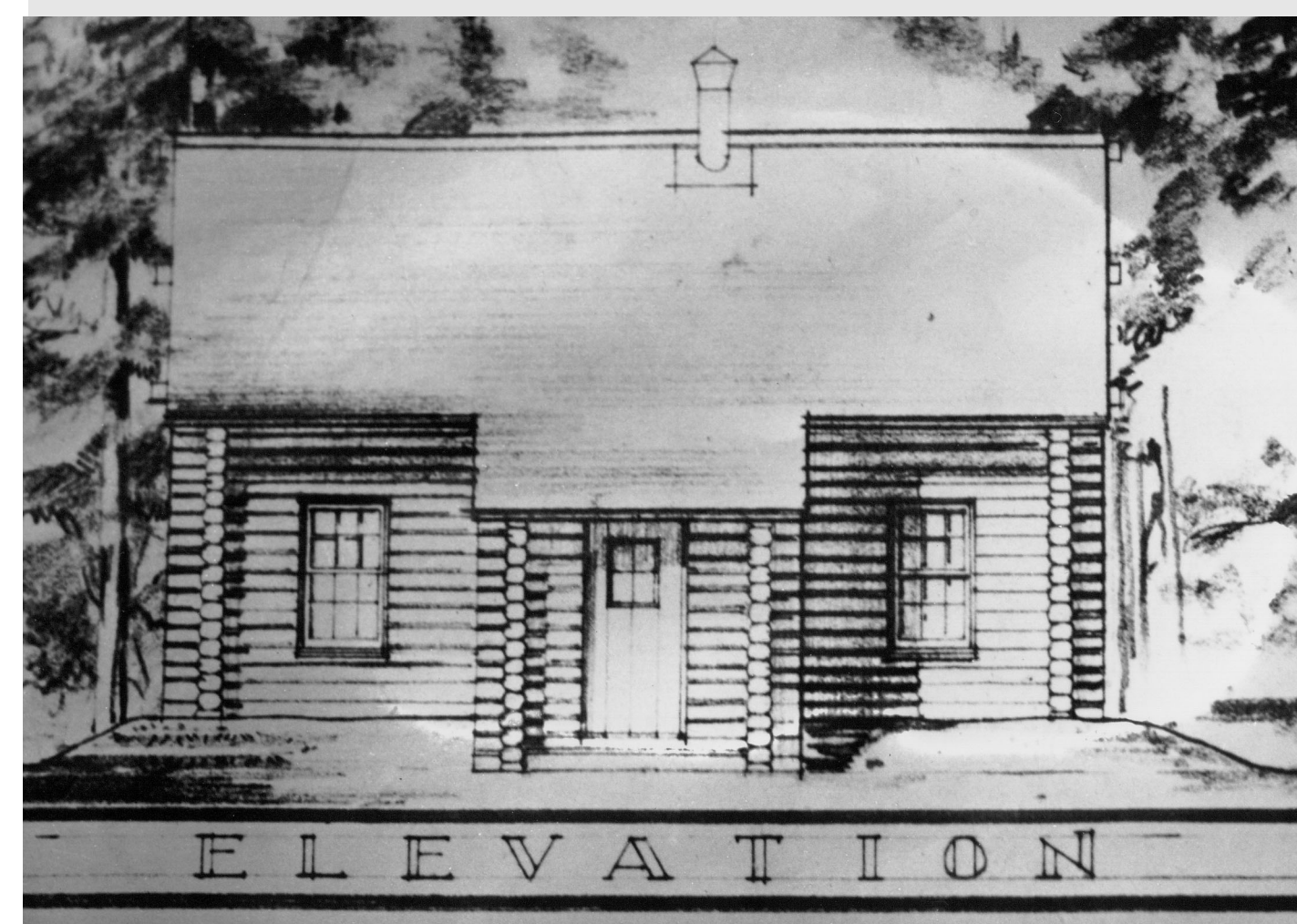
Building homes



Five different house plans were offered. Some homes were made of logs; others were frame construction.

Each plan included a living room and kitchen, and varied from one to three bedrooms. Water was to be piped indoors, but there were no

bathrooms; only chemical toilets. Heat was to be provided by wood stoves. Most colonists would not have electricity for several years; instead, homes were lighted by gasoline or kerosene lamps.



To determine where each family would live, a lottery was held to draw for their 40-acre tracts of land. On May 23rd all the colony men drew numbers that corresponded to their tracts out of a Bull Durham box. The stakes were high. Families that drew partially cleared land could start farming right away. Those who drew forested land would have a harder time getting started.

The houses had to be built before the first snows, so crews took advantage of the midnight sun to work round the clock clearing land and sawing lumber. While homes were going up, the community started taking shape also as roads and community buildings were built.

JHP notes: Interview after interview made one thing very clear: clearing land is just plain hard work.



Darrell Frank, colonist, and his daughter Joanne

"You chopped the trees down with an axe, and trimmed them up and hauled them off for firewood and burned the rest of it. And then they come in there with bulldozers and 'dozed the stumps out, into stump rows, and then we set them on fire."

— DARRELL FRANK, *Colonist*



Harry Wolfe, architect

"It was an exciting experience. I don't think many architects have a chance actually to build a city from scratch, from a bare piece of property, and that's what we did."

— HARRY WOLFE, *architect*

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No Bed of Roses

The community gathered for the funeral of Donald Koenan, the first child to die in the colony

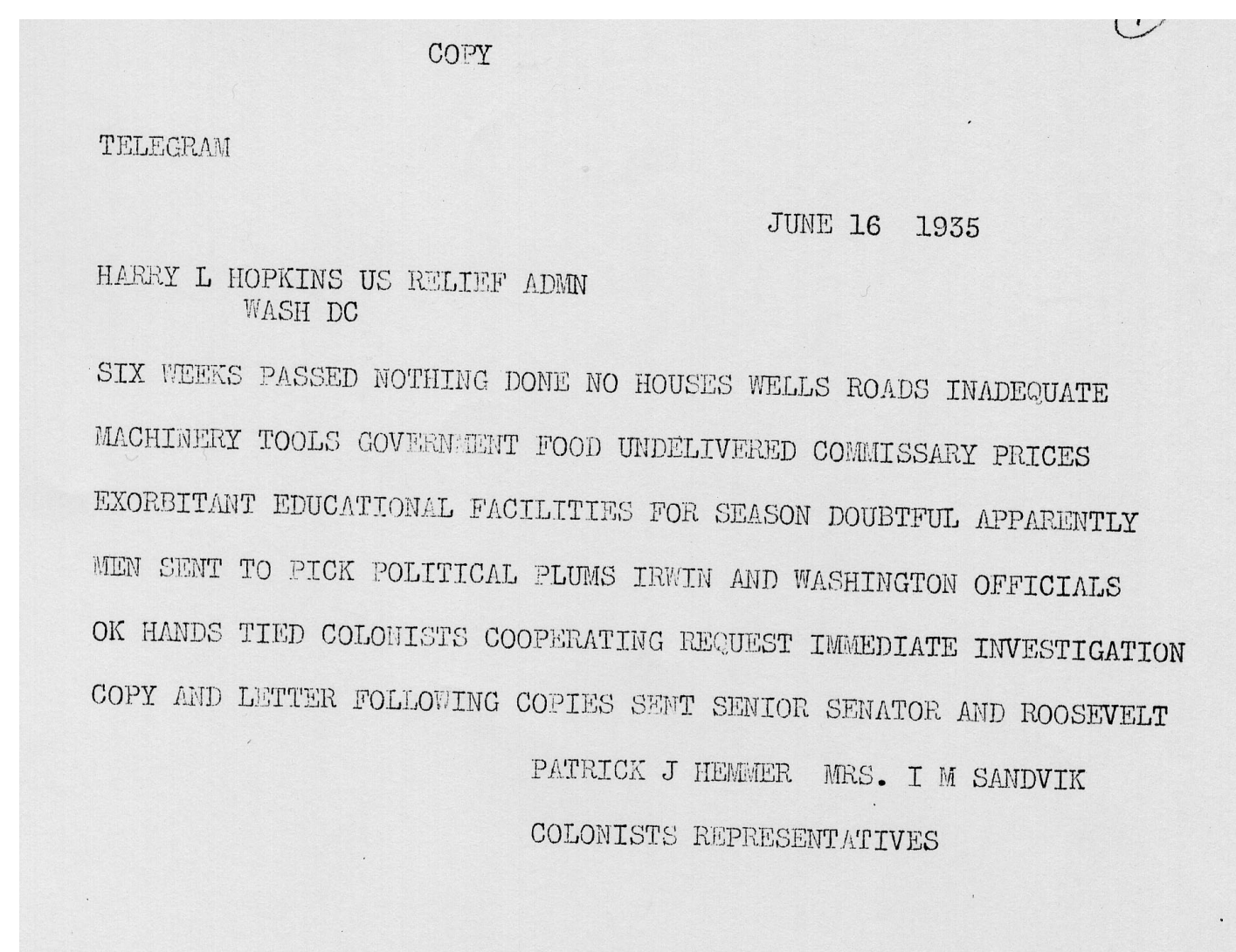


Families leaving the colony to return to the Midwest

An epidemic among the children, homesickness, worry about repaying their mounting debt to the government, and even the incessant mud and mosquitoes began to take their toll. Discontentment began to spread.

They made their concerns known to the colony administration and to Washington, stressing the lack of adequate health care, and the slow pace of construction. Their concerns were heard not only in Washington, but across the country, as their cries of protest were magnified by the press.

Harry Hopkins was summoned to Congress to report on conditions in the colony, and a blue-ribbon team was dispatched to the valley to investigate the complaints. While changes were made, the investigation also revealed that most were happy, and wanted to stay and make it work.



Colony's First Funeral Described by Reporter

BY STAFF CORRESPONDENT OF THE JOURNAL
Palmer, Alaska - (By Mail) - Jack Lund's long shadow stooped on the warehouse wall and it held a measuring stick in its hand, and Dick Bennett's shape cast by the gasoline lamp pulled a dull saw across a thin fir board.

It seemed the shadows were talking, that eerie, wet June night in the Matanuska colony warehouse, and that Jack's was saying:

"I made one of these once, when I was booming in Idaho years ago. A fellow named Colbert died and all he had in the world was his watch and his bar. So I made him a coffin out of his rosewood bar. It was a fine job, too, and we buried him in it with honors because he was a good guy."

And Bennett's was saying:

"I'm not much of a carpenter to-

and was laid on boards across two sawhorses in the hall.

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Huntley sang "Good Night Here, Good Morning Up There" and "Sometime We'll Understand." The women, and children, too, wiped tears from their eyes. The mother cried on her husband's shoulder and the father, Henry Koenen, held tight around her shoulders to lend her his strength in her mournful hour.

"Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in Me," the pastor quietly read.

After awhile the services ended. They lifted the coffin into the back of a small truck and drove it to the edge of a brush clearing, with the people filing sadly along behind.

March to a Clearing

Five hundred paces along a path through the brush without



"When they first came up here they agreed to send them back home if they didn't like it. All expenses paid. So there was a certain percent of them that probably came just for the trip. Pretty neat trip, up to Alaska, and everything paid for. And there was bound to be a lot of people that were unhappy, but the ones that stayed, they are the ones that really worked hard."

— DOROTHY SHEELY BUSH, daughter of colony administrator



"But \$3,000 - we thought that was so much money that we'd never be able to pay it!"

— MARGARET NELSON

"There were some of them that were always writing to Washington that we were not going to get in our houses, and of course they had legitimate reasons when we didn't have a doctor and there was three little boys died one right after another."

— PAUL NELSON, colonist

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Putting Down Roots



Leroy Hamann



Harvesting



Walter Pippel with his crops

Preparing the new land for crops was hard work, but well worth the effort. Crops of extraordinary size and flavor could be raised in the valley.

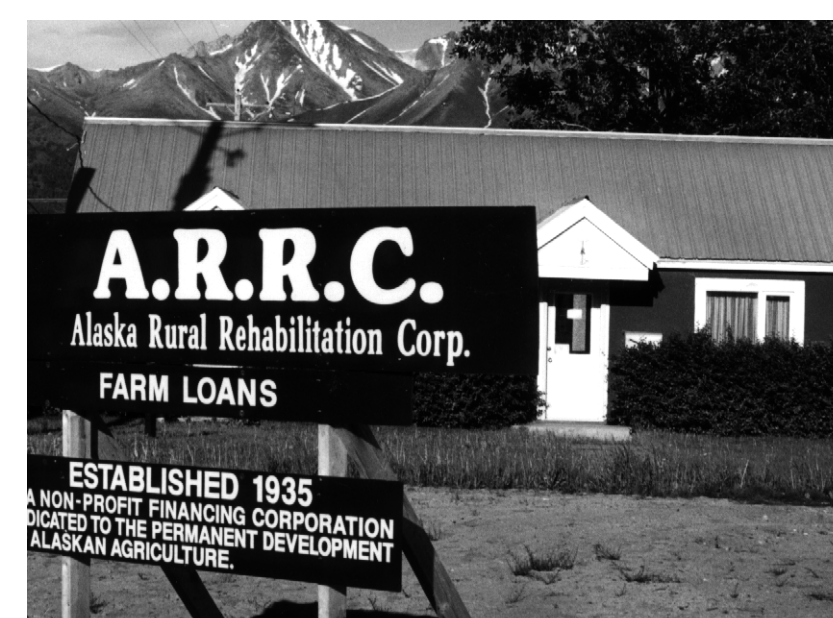
Although not all of the colonists ended up farming, those who did made the valley bloom.

Raising crops is a tough job, and the farmers faced other hurdles, as well. High production costs, the lack of a sufficient market for all they could raise, and conflicts with the administration threatened the success of the colony. However, the construction of local military bases brought a new market for the produce, and paying jobs for the colony families.

Soldiers visiting the
State Fair in Palmer
in 1941



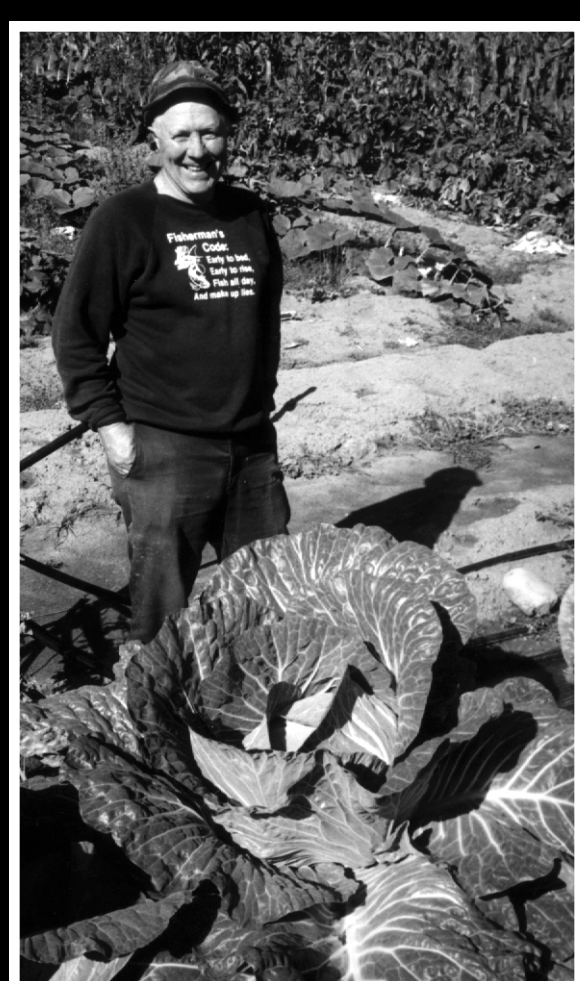
The ARRC is still a vital part of the Matanuska Valley, providing revolving loans to farmers



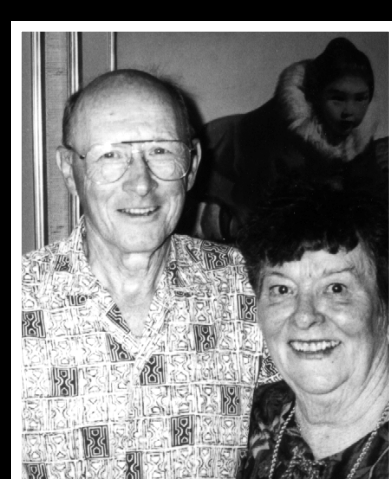
The colony celebrated its first full harvest in 1936. To prove to the world that agriculture in Alaska could be successful, a

harvest fair was held. This event grew into the State Fair, which still showcases the bounty of the Matanuska Valley. The giant vegetables, nurtured by the fertile soil and long hours of summer sunlight, are the trademark of the valley.

JHP notes: The fertile beauty of the Matanuska Valley, and the magnificent mountains that surround it, captivated us at first sight. Even as land values rise, we hope the valley will find some way to continue its agricultural heritage.



Gene Dinkel with giant cabbage



Bob Pippel, son of colonists

"I remember my dad wrote back to Minnesota, saying you can raise almost anything in Alaska, and it's bug-free and pest-free, and free of everything. And my dad knew how to raise it, he knew how to package it, and he knew how to market it."

— BOB PIPPEL, son of colonists

"This thing of being continually asked, 'Will the Matanuska Project be a success?' is getting to be something of a pain in the neck."

— JACK ALLMAN, publisher, Matanuska Valley Pioneer

ALASKA
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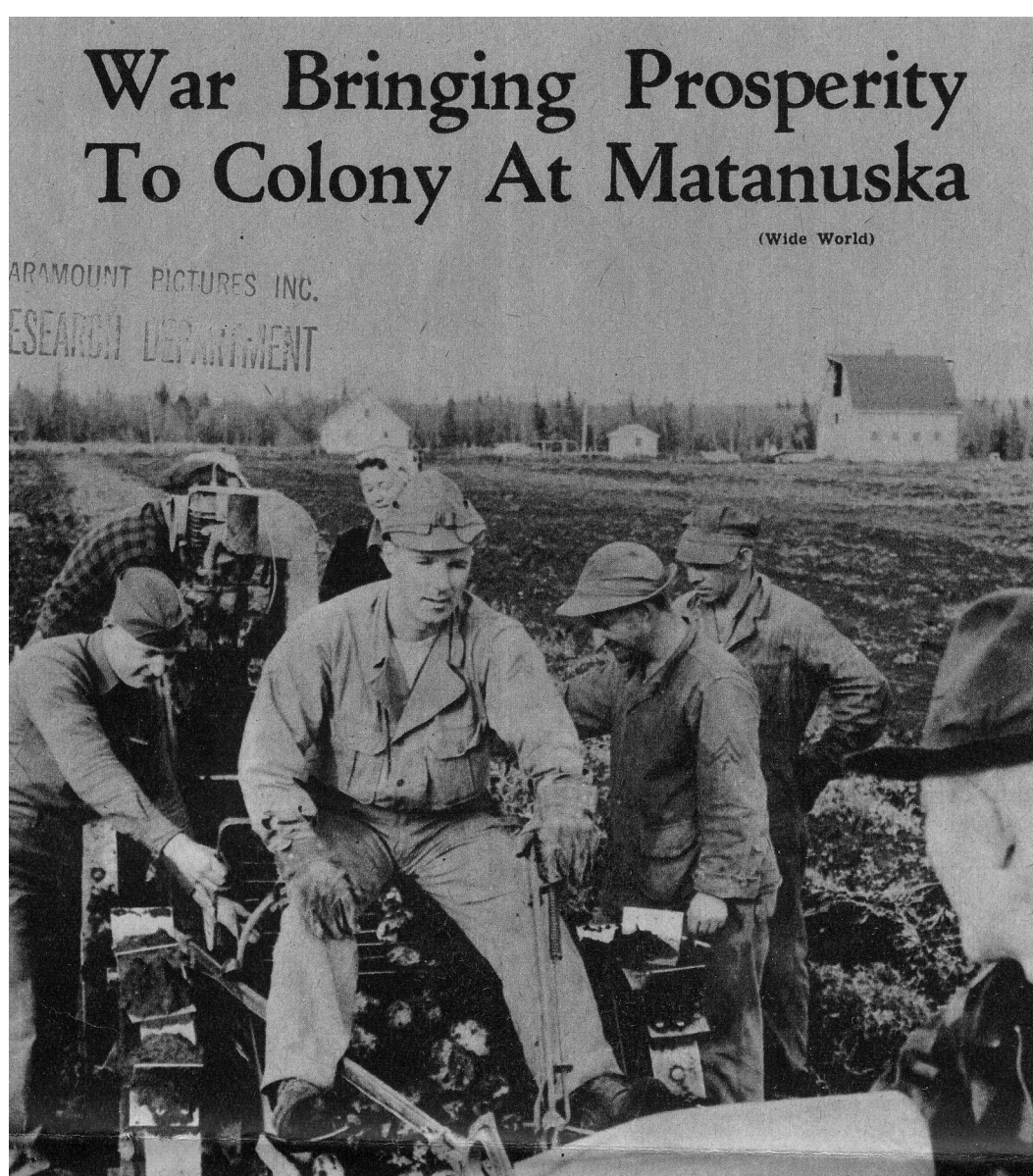
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Growing A Community



Church group



Reverend Bingle leading church services

The young community grew and flourished. Homemakers clubs, 4-H clubs, and social groups were formed. Churches and schools were built. A hospital was erected, and medical care improved. Dances, movie nights, and box socials were held. The colony's most successful crop turned out to be babies; the colony was populating the valley.

As its infrastructure grew, the colony attracted other residents to the area. Private businesses came in to fill needs not provided by the government — stores, restaurants, hotels. The area became more than just the colony: it became a real community.

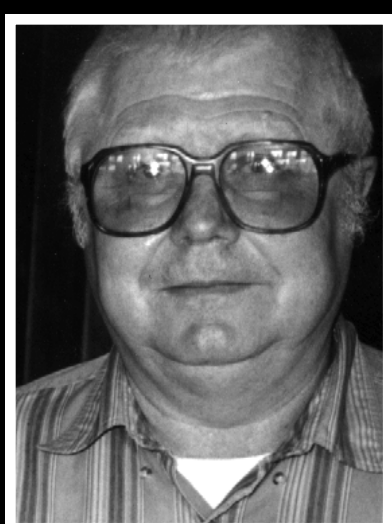
Anxious to maintain a stable population in the colony, administrators had no trouble finding willing volunteers to take the place of families who grew discouraged and left. As opposed to the original colonists, who were sent up to Alaska by the government, these "replacements" had to pay their own way.

"I think more of the replacements stayed because they had to. If you paid your own way up you had to stay. If you got money enough to get up here, that's all you had." —



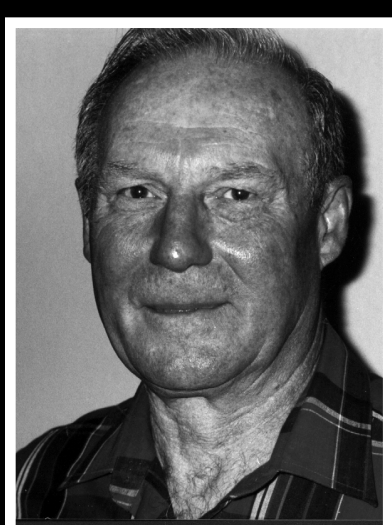
Replacement colonist Frances Dinkel and her son Don

Frances Dinkel, replacement colonist



"We did not have a sufficient market for produce, and that never came about until the war years. And when the war came, the military base building up and so forth, was the building of a market. And that's when agriculture from a commercial standpoint really took off."

— DON DINKEL



"The colony created several things. One, a more sophisticated school system. Two, more religious organizations. It created a hospital facility in the valley which had never existed before. It created more communications between people because there were simply more people. It created an attitude on some people's parts that by golly, we're civilized now."

— ALAN LINN

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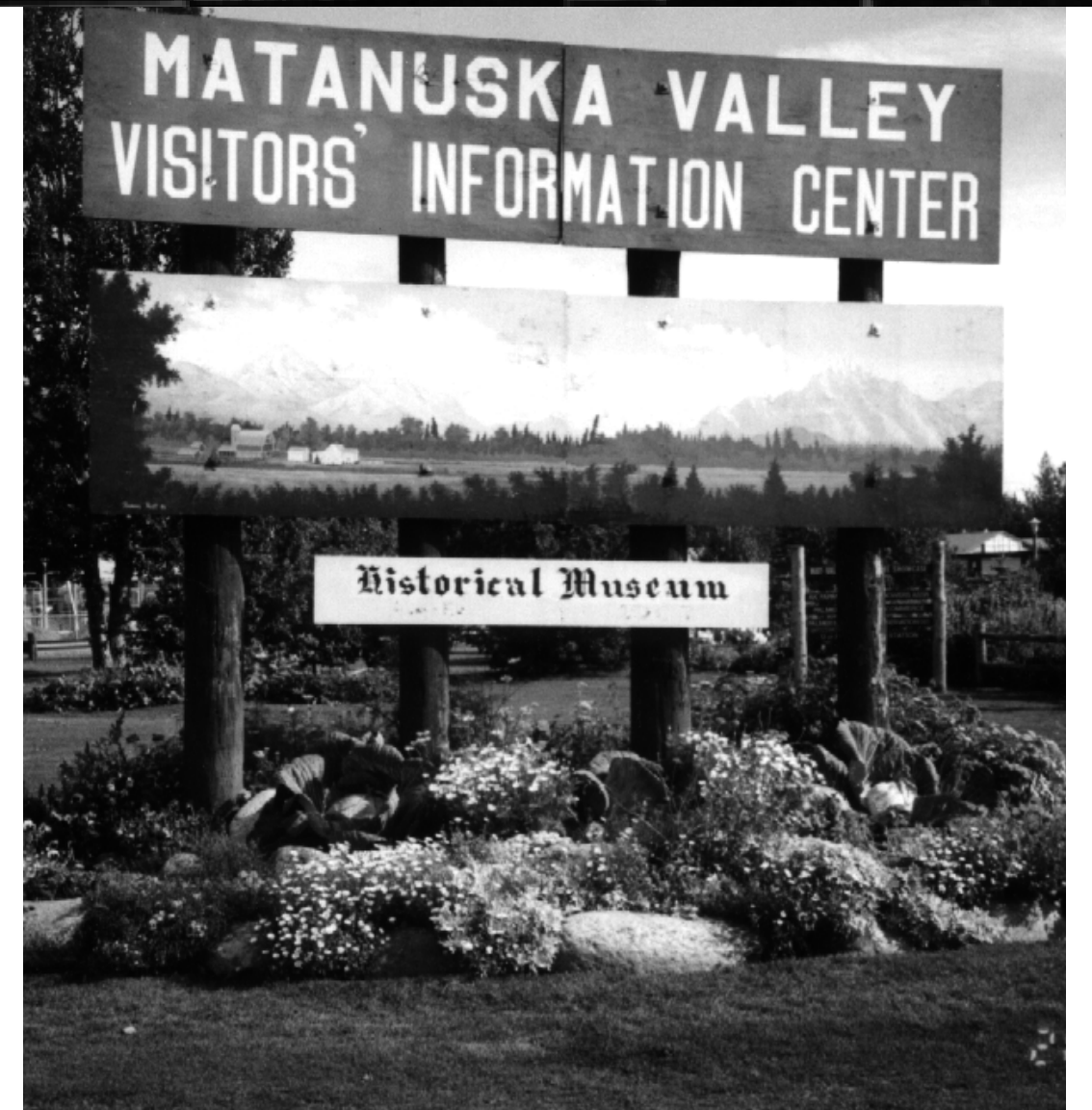
From the Past to the Future



The Trading Post



Matanuska Maid dairy



Matanuska Visitor's Center

"It's changing, it's been in a continual state of change since we arrived, and we were part of that change."

— Marcella Vasanoja Hartley, daughter of colonists

The valley has seen many changes since colony days. World War II not only brought prosperity in terms of jobs and a market for the valley's produce, but it also brought a new influx of people. As nearby Anchorage grew from the small town the colonists saw in 1935 to a major metropolitan city, land prices in the Matanuska Valley soared, and agriculture declined. But the valley's agricultural heritage and the pioneer spirit that bloomed here remain a source of community pride.

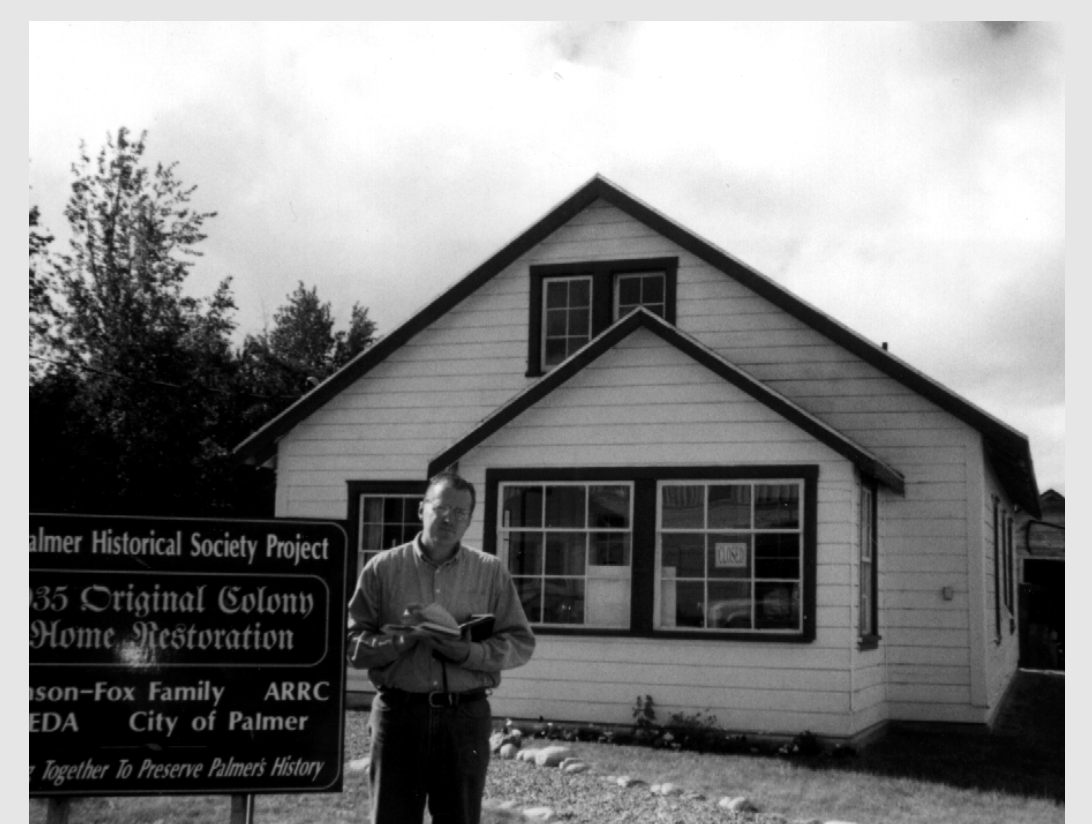


Old friends enjoying the sixtieth reunion of the colony

Palmer takes great pride in its unique history.

Throughout town there is evidence of a growing awareness of the importance of preserving their past.

The historic district, located on the site of the original tent city, provides residents and visitors with tangible reminders of this heritage.



Jim Fox, colony grandson, in front of the Colony House Museum, a project of the Palmer Historical Society

JHP notes: *The close-knit colony families have graciously allowed us access to their stories, their homes, their photos, and their reunions. Alaska Far Away has become more than just a film; it has become a network of people working together to connect this community to its past, and preserve that history for future generations.*



Some of the original colonists at the 60th reunion in 1995: Darrell Frank, Elvi Kerttula Rebarckek, Viola Lentz, Irene Benson, Lillian Eckert, Margaret Nelson, Paul Nelson

"It's important to preserve the buildings and the physical structures, but I think what's most important to preserve is the stories and the sense of community. That's really the hardest to preserve because you can't just repaint it and give it a plaque." — RUTH HULBERT, great-granddaughter of colonists

"It was a chance of a lifetime for us. We didn't realize it at the time, but we had a chance to be something, a part of something that will never happen again. Will never, never, never happen again. And we all survived, and it was an experience that we will never forget and don't want to forget."

— BILL BOUWENS, son of colonists

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A very special acknowledgement
goes to everyone who was interviewed for this film.

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